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SENSITIVE  
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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [KWMN](#) [KISL](#) [KMPI](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: DEPUTY MINISTER NOURA AL-FAIZ: AMBITIONS,  
EXPECTATIONS, AND REALITY

REF: A. RIYADH 302  
[1](#)B. RIYADH 798

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary and comment: Stinging media criticism of Noura Al-Faiz, Deputy Minister for Girls' Education, reflects the anxieties of Saudis -- especially women -- whose hopes were raised by Ms. Faiz's Valentine's Day appointment as the first Saudi female at Deputy Minister rank. Her ongoing search for a coherent strategy to reform girls' education filters into the Saudi media as insecurity and a lack of leadership. Although many influential Saudis admire her talents and tenacity and caution against a rush to judgment, Ms. Faiz's public missteps underscore the enormous challenges facing any would-be educational reformer in Saudi Arabia. End summary and comment.

IF SHE OPENS THE DOOR TOO MUCH,  
THE WIND WILL BLOW HER OVER

[1](#)2. (U) Ms. Faiz's unveiled face -- published by a Saudi newspaper announcing the new Council of Ministers -- caused uproar amongst traditional Saudis concerned about their own daughters' keenness to follow her lead. To defuse the scandal, which broke within days of her appointment, Ms. Al-Faiz swore ignorance of the picture's source while later emphasizing her family's Nejd roots (the Kingdom's conservative heartland encompassing Riyadh), which in turn disappointed Saudi progressives looking for a national leader. Ms. Al-Faiz created headlines months later by declaring herself more influential than President Obama (her profile came before his in the Time 100 Most Influential People list), then reversing her position on introducing physical education for girls (initially she said it was "way too early"), and finally meekly announcing her refusal to appear on television "unless it is allowed for us to do so." As ambivalent as her public persona has been, however, Mission contacts familiar with the considerable obstacles ahead of her stress the fact that Ms. Al-Faiz stands alone and must choose her battles wisely.

GIRLS' EDUCATION AS A HISTORICAL  
BASTION OF CONSERVATISM

[1](#)3. (U) The Ministry of Education's (MOE) 1953 establishment coincided with the opening of boys' schools in Saudi Arabia. In contrast, public education for girls was introduced in the early 1960's, and remained relatively autonomous and overwhelmingly conservative-controlled through the turn of the century. In fact, not until the tragic 2002 Mecca fire that killed 15 schoolgirls did the Saudi Arabian government merge the separate Presidency of Girls Education into the MOE. In February 2005, Abdullah bin Saleh Al-Obaid, a former head of the World Muslim League with strong religious credentials, was named Minister of Education to oversee the integration of girls' education within the MOE. Neither

Prince Faisal bin Abdullah, who replaced Al-Obeid in February 2009 (see ref B), nor Ms. Al-Faiz enjoys the same legitimacy within traditional circles. The Deputy Minister has started wearing a veil, perhaps reckoning that concessions such as this will purchase her some credibility.

WINNING OVER THE KINGDOM'S TEACHERS  
AND REGIONAL DIRECTORS

14. (U) According to the MOE website, Ms. Al-Faiz directs 16,875 schools, 226,281 teachers, and 2,496,349 female students. The 102 schools and 10,000 new female teachers the MOE plans to add this year far exceed the 100 trainers and 1,000 students she oversaw as director of women's training at the Institute for Public Administration (IPA), where she built her reputation. When teachers called recently for reforming the school assignment policy, Ms. Al-Faiz advised the unhappy ones to retire or resign, displaying insensitivity towards the long commutes that often lead to traffic fatalities. Meanwhile, at the regional level Ms. Al-Faiz must overcome gender segregation to engage the 42 men directing the Kingdom's 42 male education directorates, which Post contacts report effectively run female education as well despite the presence of titular women counterparts. Rather than tackling this structural problem from the outset, however, Ms. Al-Faiz has praised the regional directors as "creative and innovative" and rejected calls for their replacement. At the same time, female education officials are gaining prominence: On June 28th the male Director General of Girls Education in the Riyadh region announced the appointment of four women as office directors and deputy directors within the MOE.

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CASH IS GREAT, BUT LEADERSHIP EVEN BETTER

15. (SBU) King Abdullah's increases in education funding at all levels and a building binge for women's facilities, together with his placement of accomplished and trusted reformers in crucial MOE leadership positions, highlight the fundamental role educational reform plays in his vision for Saudi Arabia's future. Nevertheless, bold leadership at Ms. Al-Faiz's level and below is necessary to overcome massive bureaucratic resistance to change, whether driven by ideology or laziness.

ERDMAN